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ApProppriations and ImProprieties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative

by David Bordwell

When Vladimir Propp died in 1970, his name had become a reference point in the theory of narrative. *The Morphology of the Folktale,* published in Russian in 1928, appeared in English thirty years later and was soon brought out in other languages. Anthropologists and folklorists were quick to praise, criticize, test, and revise his claims.[1] A. J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Bremond, and Roland Barthes made the *Morphology* one point of departure for structuralist narratology, and homage is still paid in the poststructuralist era.[2] Soon after the publication of the 1968 revised English edition of the *Morphology,* Peter Wollen suggested that Propp might be a fruitful source for cinema semiotics, and over the last decade, film and television studies have developed a tradition of morphological analysis.[3] As recently as 1985, a writer in *The Cinema Book* allotted several large-format pages to Proppian analysis.[4]

For many critics, Propp has become the Aristotle of film narratology; yet his influence has come at the cost of serious misunderstandings. The English editions of the *Morphology* pose problems of injudicious editing and faulty translation. More problematically, film scholars have taken Propp out of context and recast him almost out of recognition. There are good reasons to regard the "Proppian" approach to film narrative as a dead end.

The argument for the morphological approach, although usually tacit, seems to run this way[5]:

1. Through structural analysis, the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp revealed that the underlying structure of the folktale consists of thirty-one functions.

   As Geoffrey Hartmann puts it: "In his *Morphology of the Folktale,* Propp established the structure of that form by analyzing out a finite number of 'functions' or type-episodes which every folktale combines."[6]

2. The same set of functions can be revealed in other narrative genres and media, in particular, Hollywood films.

   This is the moment of "application." Propp's functional schema is hypothesized to be widespread in narratives. Some writers would agree with Greimas that Propp's schema, suitably revised, forms a universal model of narrative organization.[7] One writer discovers a Proppian structure in a celebrated World Series game.[8] Film scholars have found the schema in *North by Northwest, Sunset Boulevard, Kiss Me Deadly,* and *The Big Sleep.*

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3. a. Substantive conclusion: Many narratives share a structural morphology with folktales.

b. Methodological conclusion: Propp's method can reveal the underlying structure of narrative in cinema and other media.

These conclusions are neatly summed up in a recent discussion of Propp and television criticism. A Proppian study shows that (a) "American television is remarkably like Russian fairy tales" and that (b) "Stories are governed by a set of unwritten rules acquired by all storytellers and receivers, much the way we all acquire the basic rules of grammar."[9]

In what follows, I shall try to show that the first two steps of the argument are fatally flawed, both empirically and conceptually. Thus the double-barreled conclusion is unwarranted. I shall close with some speculations on why film studies so uncritically embraced a Proppian program.

The first thesis of the argument portrays Propp as adhering to Russian Formalist literary theory, as performing a structural analysis, as concerned wholly with functions, and as successfully revealing them. All of these claims can be challenged.

Propp was never a central member of the Russian Formalist group; at most he may be said to have been influenced by Viktor Zhirmunsky, a marginal and dissenting Formalist.[10] As a folklorist, Propp's study of narrative derives most directly from contemporary work in ethnopoetics. Heda Jason has shown that many of his concepts, and even the title of his book, can be traced to folklore research of the previous twenty years. The idea that a folktale is built out of abstract actions performed by narrative roles was proposed in 1912 by Elena Eleonskaja and revived in 1924 by Aleksandr Skaftymov, who suggested that one could build up a linear model of such episodes.[11] Roman Volkov's *Folktale: Investigations in the Plot Composition of the Folktale* (1924), although severely criticized in the *Morphology,* nonetheless supplied Propp with many concepts. Volkov assumed the distinction between constant and variable features, proposed that the same character could fulfill different roles, suggested that the order of motifs was constant, and introduced the concept of an abstract model specific to each type of tale.

Volkov also devised six narrative roles (five of which would appear in Propp's scheme) and disclosed plot structures similar to those which Propp would reveal later.[12] Most proximately there was Aleksandr I. Nikiforov, who in a brief 1927 article set forth the concept of "function" as the action of a narrative role, defined the episode functionally within the overall tale framework, anticipated Propp's conception of "move," and called his project "the morphology of the folktale."[13] Nikiforov's programmatic article does not itemize functions in detail, as Propp was to do, but in certain respects it points toward a more supple analysis; Jason suggests that where Propp is taxonomic, Nikiforov is generative.[14] Since Propp published a two-page essay, "Morphology of the Russian Wondertale" in 1927 as well, questions of priority arise; in any event, it is clear that Soviet folklore

studies, not Russian Formalism, furnish the most pertinent context for the 1928 book.

The difference between Nikiforov's and Propp's titles—"Morphology of the Folktale" and "Morphology of the Russian Wondertale"—points to another misconception about Propp's enterprise. Contrary to common belief, *his narrative schema does not seek to describe all folktales.* The *Morphology* takes as its subject only the genre known loosely as the "fairy tale," more precisely as the "magical heroic tale" or the "wondertale." (The book's original title, Propp explained in 1966, was *Morphology of the Wondertale,* but the editor altered the title.)[15] The prototypical wondertale presents a hero who, in order to solve a problem or win a princess, is given a magical device by a supernatural agent. In focusing on this genre, Propp deliberately neglected religious tales, romantic tales, ballads, fables, cumulative tales, and other varieties of folk narrative.[16] The *Morphology* is explicit: "We possess thousands of other tales not resembling fairy tales."[17]

Propp also confined much of his later work to this genre. His 1928 essay, "Transformations of the Wondertale," outlines how one might identify older forms on the basis of changes in motifs or motivations. More conspicuously, his 1939 doctoral dissertation, published in 1946 as *Historical Roots of the Wondertale,* is usually considered to provide the diachronic accompaniment to the synchronic *Morphology.* Again he stipulates his exclusion: "My first premise is that among folktales there is a particular category called wondertales which can be isolated and studied independently."[18] Propp reiterates this *parti pris* in his 1966 polemic with Lévi-Strauss, insisting that the *Morphology* had no interest in generating an abstract model of oral narrative.[19] Subsequently, in view of the tendency of Structuralists like Lévi-Strauss and Greimas to take Propp's schema as general or universal, folklorists have stressed that it applies only to the genre upon which he concentrated.[20]

Propp studies structure, as the argument's first premise supposes, but to characterize his enterprise as structural analysis obscures two aspects of it. First is its overall historical aim. Although Propp's eventual turn to diachronic study could be interpreted as a response to official disapproval of purely "formal" research, the development has a certain consistency within the research program Propp outlined in 1928. Structural study of meaning, he remarks in the *Morphology,* must be linked to historical research; the former is indispensable to the latter.[21] In his Foreword, Propp remarks that for the sake of compression he has had to exclude "questions of metamorphosis, i.e., of the transformations of the tale."[22] These matters are taken up in his 1928 essay. The full-length study *Historical Roots* constitutes an attempt to reveal the origins of the wondertale, a project that Propp carefully distinguishes from a study of transformations, or historical development.[23] True, one could argue that in his later work Propp abandons most of the fine-grained morphological detail, confining himself either to isolated motifs or to a much looser notion of plot structure.[24] Again, however, this tendency is no less present in the 1928 essay than in the 1946 book on origins, so if there is a retreat from formalism it starts immediately. In large part,

it seems fair to see Propp's structural analysis as a means to historical ends: accurately identifying similar tales, defining a genre more exactly than heretofore, and putting source-study on a rigorous basis.

If Propp is at least partly historical in his aims, he considers his methods wholly scientific. Throughout the *Morphology* he appeals to taxonomic assumptions in botany and zoology. In the original Russian, many of the chapters contain epigraphs from Goethe's *Morphology,* his writings on botany and osteology. (These quotations were excised from the English translation.)[25] In the "Transformations" essay Propp compares his task with that of revealing genus, species, and variety in nature.[26] Nearly four decades later, he is still insisting that zoology shows that exact description and classification are necessary to make a study "scientific."[27]

Going beyond taxonomy, Propp demands that folklore use science's inductive method, moving "from data to conclusions" and avoiding a priori general theories, which bias the selection of data.[28] In his 1966 polemic with Lévi-Strauss, he calls himself "an empiricist, indeed an incorruptible empiricist, who first scrutinizes the facts and studies them carefully, checking his premises and looking back at every step in his reasoning."[29] While some empirical work aims only at description, the highest sort seeks to reveal laws. This Propp attempted, again, "in a small and narrow area—one type of folktale."[30] He claims that his is a concrete morphology, derived from the plot's temporal order. It is not "logical" in the manner of atemporal binary oppositions; these are a priori grids, the tools of a deductive approach. "My model corresponds to what was modeled and is based on a study of data. . . . Lévi-Strauss carries out his logical operations in total disregard of the material (he is not in the least interested in the wondertale, nor does he attempt to learn more about it) and removes the functions from their temporal sequence."[31] Propp's appeal to an inductive discovery of laws rests upon problematic assumptions, which he does not interrogate or defend. The essential point, nonetheless, is that his approach represents an alternative to one that postulates a pervasive interpretive scheme—say, the Lévi-Straussian antinomy of culture and nature—that the analyst then shows to be the real meaning of the corpus. For Propp, this is an appropriate strategy for a philosopher, but not for a scientist. His version of "structural analysis" is quite far from structuralism.

The power-of-Propp argument usually hinges upon the thirty-one "functions" that the *Morphology* attributes to the wondertale. One film scholar goes so far as to consider the Proppian function to be the basic unit of all narrativity.[32] While the functions dominate Propp's book, however, they cannot be fully understood outside the context of his overall system. And because advocates of the Proppian approach have not delineated that system, we need to consider, if only briefly, his theory and his conclusions.

It is helpful to see the *Morphology* as an answer to a particular question: What enables us to recognize wondertales as similar, either as members of the same genre or as cross-cultural variants? Obviously not oral performance factors, such as verbal style or attributes that the storyteller occasionally assigns to the characters. These features are too superficial and variable to constitute a basis

for classification and comparison. Most folklorists solved the problem of similarity by picking out motifs that recur in different plots. This was in fact the basis of Antti Aarne's deciding, in his 1911 taxonomy, that the wondertale, with its winged horses and fire-breathing dragons, constitutes a distinct genre. Propp criticizes the motif approach on the grounds that any narrative unit, such as "A czar gives an eagle to a hero," contains several elements or motifs, most of which can be replaced by others (e.g., "A sorceror gives Ivan a little boat"). Such a substitution will not violate our sense that the tales are similar. The motif analyst characterizes the wondertale by a tacit hierarchy: particular motifs get assembled into a plot. Propp seeks to define the tale by its "composition" or "morphology": a set of basic actions, performed by a group of agents and arranged into patterns. The "surface-level" hierarchy of motif analysis is replaced by a "deeper" one.

Because the motifs or objects and persons can vary from tale to tale, only the actions—giving, or removing, or battling—can form the constants that trigger our intuition that two tales are similar. The building blocks of the wondertale must therefore be actions. Thus Propp arrives at the two basic units of his scheme: *functions*, or actions that affect the overall course of the tale, and *auxiliaries*, acts that link functions. "The hero and villain battle" is a function; "The hero travels to the battlefield" is an auxiliary.

Evidently the function will be the principal index to the underlying structure of the wondertale. Propp notes that some functions invariably occur in pairs (e.g., interdiction/violation, or struggle/victory) and others occur in groups of three or four.[33] He also acknowledges that some compositional units are neither functions nor auxiliaries; there is, for instance, the initial situation, or the stray component derived from another genre.[34] Sometimes too the same action can fulfill two functions, as when the princess leaves the house, thereby violating the prince's interdictions and succumbing to the villain.[35] Such qualifications rest on the assumption that Propp's functional scheme aims not to describe every possible or existing wondertale but only to identify those minimal conditions that distinguish this genre from its neighbors. Significantly, the centrality of functions leads him to list all the concrete actions that in this corpus constitute the functions. For example, the Villainy function consists of abduction, seizing a magical agent, pillaging crops, assaulting someone, and so on. Propp seeks to provide an exhaustive description of all such "surface-level" action-based motifs characteristic of the wondertale. Yet even such lists of motifs render the scheme classificatory, not generative.

Actions, embodied centrally in functions, are taken up within the next level of Propp's hierarchy. In the wondertale, the characteristic functions are grouped according to what agent may execute them. Typically, the acts of departing on a search, reacting to the demands of the donor, and getting married are all performed by the same agent—the hero. The acts of transferring the hero in space, liquidating the misfortune or lack, rescuing the hero from pursuit, and so on are all performed by the helper. Propp arranges the functions into seven "spheres of action," each of which corresponds to a "tale role" (villain, donor,

helper, princess/her father, dispatcher, hero, and false hero). Instead of treating a character as a person with the capacity for action, Propp treats her or him as an emergent entity, an effect of structure.

Unfortunately, the English translation of the *Morphology* confuses the "tale roles" with the actual characters.[36] Propp needs the distinction between the two because the "surface-level" character, as a motif, may correspond only partly to the underlying tale role.[37] In the wondertale, the grateful animal may operate both as a donor and as a helper, thus mixing the functions characteristic of two tale roles.[38] Or a single role may be assigned to several characters. As villain, the dragon battles the hero but, because the dragon is killed, he cannot fulfill the villain's function of pursuing the hero (a task which, Propp observes gravely, is invariably assigned to the dragon's female relatives). Whereas Propp itemizes all wondertale-specific forms of the functions, he does not attempt to list all the characters that can become vehicles of the seven spheres of action. This is because the characters' attributes are highly variable and do not yield the compositional constants that supply the sense of similarity across tales.

Functions and tale roles are in turn absorbed into what Propp calls "moves." A move is a closed sequence of functions, a distinct line of action. In turn, one or more moves are assembled in various ways to comprise the tale as a whole. The tale may possess only one move; if it has more, it may link them successively, or interrupt one by another, or run them on parallel tracks.[39] At this point Propp arrives at a description of the organization of the entire tale.

Using this theory of hierarchically ordered functions, tale roles, moves, and overall syntagmatic structure, Propp is able to come to specific conclusions about his chosen genre of oral literature. He claims that the wondertale is characterized by a set of thirty-one functions; although no tale possesses all of them, all tales have certain of them. These functions almost always occur in unvarying order, even if some are omitted. The wondertale is also characterized by certain auxiliary actions and, more decisively, by the seven tale roles mentioned above. The wondertale also displays a limited selection of moves, chiefly that beginning with the functions Villainy, or Lack, and ending with Marriage, or Ascension to the Throne. Propp believes that these features, taken *in toto,* supply necessary and sufficient conditions for our intuitive sense of similarity across tales.[40] In sum, although functions hold a privileged place in the theory and occupy most of Propp's conclusions, we cannot ignore their place in his larger system.

Finally, most Propp advocates have assumed that he succeeded; that is, that his morphology of the wondertale is accurate and conceptually coherent. Actually, his work remains controversial.[41] In a recent essay, Claude Bremond and Jean Verrier assert that Propp's analysis bears only on eighty-seven of the one hundred tales he sampled from Afanasiev's collection; that Propp's schema was built from only one wondertale-type, that known as the "Dragon-Slayer"; and that Propp ignores, misrepresents, and miscodes the tale's actions. (For example, Propp finds only one move in "The Language of the Birds," but Bremond assigns it five.) Bremond also locates instances where Propp seriously distorts a tale's action,

apparently for the sake of preserving his scheme. Bremond concludes that some stories cannot be reduced to Propp's model without destroying essential elements of the plot; that others are inconsistently transcribed by Propp; and that others have in effect been rewritten by Propp.[42]

It is beyond my competence to evaluate this critique, but other questions have probably nagged many readers. When Propp encounters tales that shift the supposedly invariable order of functions, he considers them mere "fluctuations."[43] He offers a catch-all functional category of "unclear elements," and posits the awkward and inconsistent tale role of "princess/her father."[44] When he describes as parallel functions, "The initial lack is liquidated" and "The hero is branded" he introduces varying levels of abstraction.[45] More generally, we cannot be sure whether his functional schema describes the narrative's *fabula*, the underlying causal-chronological "story," or to the *syuzhet*, the pattern of events as manifested in the text; the difficulty is compounded by the fact that his "texts" are already boiled-down schematic versions in the Afanasiev collection. There is also a persistent problem of transcription. Any narrative can be described in various ways—as centering on a problem, an instability, a question, a misfortune, or a lack. These descriptions can easily be translated into one another: to have a problem is usually to lack something, to be in an unstable situation is to undergo a misfortune, and so on. Why should we prefer Propp's descriptions to others? He offers no answer.

On the whole, such challenges and questions have not issued from scholars in film.[46] They have taken Propp at his word when he declares that his scheme demonstrates "the total uniformity in the construction of fairy tales."[47]

That Propp was more crucially influenced by contemporary ethnopoetics than by Russian Formalist literary theory, that he did not study the folktale as such, that he was much more historical and inductivist than is generally recognized, that he proposed not only functions but tale roles and moves as constitutive of the genre he sought to describe, and that his success in this enterprise is far from certain—all these points cast doubt on the conventional first premise in the argument for the Proppian approach to film. What of the second premise? Can the features which he ascribes to oral narrative legitimately be found in other media, particularly cinema? I shall argue that, in the revised standard version of Propp offered by film analysts, such application has failed both conceptually and empirically.

The very basis of the application needs to be questioned. Why should a method derived for the analysis of oral narratives of a pre-feudal era hold good for a modern medium developed in a capitalist economy and a mass society? Although Wollen raises this question briefly,[48] neither he nor any other analyst has answered it. There is, I think, a tacit assumption that because Hollywood cinema is "popular" in a sense vaguely akin to the "folk" character of oral literature, narratives produced in each sphere ought to have something in common. Yet Hollywood cinema derives most proximately from nineteenth-century

theater and literature, themselves part of an industrialized mass culture; any relations to preliterate peasant cultures are distant, partial, and highly mediated. Moreover, Propp insists on the domain-specificity of his account. As we have seen, he maintains that the *Morphology*'s conclusions are valid only for the wondertale. He further argues that the poetics of folklore is sharply different from that of a literate culture; folklore genres and literary genres possess different morphologies.[49] In his rejoinder to Lévi-Strauss he takes pride in the fact that the *Morphology*'s discoveries will not hold good for the artificial folktales of Goethe or Novalis.[50] Such justifiable caution in extending the analysis outside its initial domain has not sufficiently registered upon film scholars. If Propp resists projecting his conclusions onto literary genres and even onto other folktale types, why should we expect to find them enlightening if applied to Hollywood movies or television shows?

Someone might object that Propp is simply wrong and that his conclusions are of wider applicability than he realized. But this is a self-defeating argument. Propp set out to differentiate, by necessary and sufficient conditions, a specific class of tales. To the extent that his conclusions are valid for *other* classes, the features he specifies cannot demarcate this class. If we make Propp successful in describing most or all narrative structures, then he fails to distinguish the wondertale as a genre. He cannot succeed in both. Now if he aims to define the specificity of the wondertale and fails, there is no reason to assume that he has successfully described something else and thus no reason to take his scheme as a model of analysis. If I seek to differentiate owls from doves, and I err so thoroughly that all my claims hold good for ostriches and penguins too, it does not follow that I have accidentally provided an accurate description of the entire bird kingdom. It is at least as likely that I am wrong on all counts. If Propp is wrong about his domain of material, then there is no compelling reason to believe that he is inadvertently right about anything else.

The Proppian *cinéphile* might respond that Propp's schema holds good outside his domain because it "fits" many films. I want to show, however, that this fit comes too easily. In keeping with his desire to demarcate a genre, Propp employs constraints at various levels—the limited number of motifs in the tale, the exhaustive inventory of motifs instantiating functions, the fixed order of functions, and the limited number of tale roles and moves. Film analysts have had a contrary end in view, that of expanding Propp's realm of applicability; and they have achieved that end through an unconstrained combining and a metaphorical redescription of isolated wondertale functions. This process constitutes film studies' "revised standard version" of Propp's method. Peter Wollen's 1976 study of *North by Northwest*, the first, most detailed, and most influential work in this tradition, offers a cogent example.

Like most other analysts, Wollen does not utilize Propp's entire conceptual system. He ignores the category of tale roles and, instead of marking out moves, he divides the film into days—a segmentation principle irrelevant to Propp's scheme. Wollen thus rests his case on functions, which he frequently notates in

a capricious fashion.[51] Most central, however, is the manner in which his use of the concept of function creates distortions, omissions, and unconstrained analogies.

Wollen's analysis reveals the strain of describing actions in *North by Northwest* in terms of Propp's functions. Wollen claims that Thornhill's initial visit to the Oak Bar constitutes the violation of an interdiction: "Thornhill's mother has forbidden him to drink too much, but nevertheless he goes to the Oak Bar . . . to have two martinis."[52] But we do not know that she has *forbidden* him to drink too much, only that she doesn't like it when he does. Moreover, he never does drink anything at the bar, so there is no violation. Yet to squeeze the film into Propp's formula, Wollen must find an interdiction and a violation somewhere early on. Similarly, if forced to apply the Proppian grid, nearly every viewer would take the attempt of Van Damm's henchmen to force the drunken Thornhill to drive off a cliff as an act of villainy, Propp's *A* function. But to Wollen this is an instance of function *G*, the "transference between two kingdoms." Presumably he made this choice because he previously had listed two *A*'s. Apparently the scheme forces Wollen to declare that attempted murder is not an act of villainy, but locking Thornhill in Van Damm's library is.

This problem recurs throughout the analysis. As Thornhill tries to buy a train ticket, the agent recognizes him and calls the police, but Wollen notates this as "*un*recognized arrival" and "pursuit," the better to adhere to Propp's sequence. When Valerian, disguised as a gardener, glares after Thornhill and the departing policemen, Wollen calls this not reconnaissance—we already had that—but pursuit. Interestingly, important plot events, like Thornhill and Eve falling in love, can only be labeled auxiliaries; Propp furnishes no romance-based functions, so Wollen must treat an entire plotline as a set of transitional events. Similarly, the kidnappers' seizure of Thornhill can be labeled reconnaissance and discovery, but Wollen has no way to record a crucial feature of the action—that it is an *error.* (Propp supplies no such category, presumably because he finds no mistaken reconnaissance in the wondertale corpus.) Because so many salient events in *North by Northwest* cannot be forced into Propp's categories, Wollen must make much heavier use of inversions and other modifications than Propp does (including some that Propp never uses), but even these yield bizarre results, as when Thornhill's separation from Eve is coded as the "inversion" of a wedding.

Often these distortions issue from Wollen's attempt to respect Propp's claim that the functions appear in an invariable sequence. But elsewhere Wollen treats Propp's functions as freely combinable events. For Propp, the act of branding (function *J*) occurs during the fight with the villain and must appear with functions *H* (the combat) and *I* (the defeat of the villain). Wollen considers Thornhill's being photographed at the United Nations to instantiate the branding function. But here there is no combat with the villain, and certainly the villain is not defeated. Wollen has simply likened the flashbulb snapshot of Thornhill to a branding. Similarly, Wollen finds the liquidation-of-lack function (*K*) at four separate points in the film, but Propp claims that this is the *peak* of the narrative and must correct the initial act of villainy (*A*); neither condition is met in Wollen's

analysis. Such pointillistic treatment of the *Morphology*'s categories flouts Propp's structural point and is vulnerable to his criticism: "The forced removal of the functions from the temporal sequence destroys the artistic fabric of the narrative."[53]

The analyst's willingness to reshuffle order appears to reflect a belief that the morphological categories are no more than an assortment of isolable actions. Here "application" consists of simply tagging a story event with a wondertale label. Virtually any time Thornhill departs from anywhere, be it the Oak Bar, the United Nations, Chicago, the observation deck at Mount Rushmore, or the Rapid City hospital, Wollen notes the event as "hero leaves home." (In fact, we never see Thornhill's home.) When Thornhill asks questions, Wollen usually calls this reconnaissance. At several points, if one or two aspects of a scene overlap with some feature of a Proppian function, that function gets applied, even if the *salient* feature of the function is not present. In discussing Van Damm's questioning of Thornhill in Townsend's library, Wollen assigns the passage the Proppian function *D*, in which the donor offers a gift. He justifies this on the grounds that Van Damm promises a "gift/payment" in exchange for information.[54] But in the wondertale, and in Propp's scheme, the door gives a *magical* gift, and it will liquidate the lack or redress the villainy posited at the outset. These are the central aspects of the function. Whatever Van Damm will give (he says only, "I don't expect to get this for nothing"; we might better call it a bribe), it will not meet Propp's criteria. Perhaps the limit of this atomistic treatment comes when Wollen notates Van Damm's decision to kill Thornhill as *F*=, which stands for the function, "the hero's negative reaction to the receipt of a magical agent provokes cruel retribution from the donor."[55] Ignoring the fact that in Townsend's library Thornhill receives no magical agent—the very basis of the *F* function—Wollen has simply taken the "negative reaction" and "cruel retribution" components as sufficient criteria for their pertinence here.

The wondertale is literally about heroes, princesses, flying horses, and so on; it depicts battles, brandings, and unmaskings. To compare a photograph with a branding, a bribe with a gift, and a mother's nagging with an interdiction is to perform metaphorical interpretations of what is literal in the wondertale. Once we permit such metaphorical readings, there are no constraints on what we can do with Propp's scheme. In Propp, there is a definite lack announced at the tale's outset, and the hero sets forth in search of what will relieve it. In Propp-derived film studies, this lack need not be explicit, and the hero's movement need not be derived from it. For Wollen, Thornhill lacks both a bride and knowledge about the spy ring; but he does not set out in search of either.

For Propp, recognition constitutes a public unmasking of the hero, but Wollen assumes that recognition occurs whenever Eve spots Roger and others do not. Whenever Thornhill escapes capture or annihilation, Wollen attributes it to a "magical agent," but this maneuver is sheerly rhetorical: there is no *magic*, in the Proppian sense, involved in Roger's glibness, resourcefulness, and ability to hold his liquor. The effort shows in Wollen's explanation: "At first sight, Eve's

main role is to grant Thornhill aid—virtually in the form of the magical power of invisibility. Three times (triplication) he evades his pursuers, through being concealed in an upper berth in Eve's cabin, through disguise as a redcap at Chicago's Randolph Street station carrying Eve's baggage, and by lather while shaving with Eve's miniature razor. The miraculous success of these simple disguises suggests magical powers."[56] Terms like *invisibility* and *miraculous success* are simply metaphorical evocations of wondertale actions; Roger receives nothing like a flying horse or a magic carpet.

Admittedly, one could perform a more careful analysis by adhering more closely to Propp's categories. One could, for instance, recognize that many events that Wollen notates as functions would be better considered auxiliaries. (This might handle Thornhill's arrivals and departures, or the exchange of information, which Propp calls "notification.") But the problem of constraints remains. Because most films are not wondertales, the analyst cannot respect Propp's strictures. Adhering stringently to Propp's order of functions distorts the events in the text at hand, but ignoring the order makes Propp's scheme merely an incomplete assortment of possible plot actions. Either way, to make the scheme "fit," Propp's deepest assumptions must be violated.

Most critics have taken the no-constraints option. Roland Barthes, determined to match Genesis 29:1-33:18 to Propp's functions 15-19, must shuffle the order of sections and of individual functions, ignore the concept of moves, and incorporate tale roles only insofar as he casts God as the villain. Yet Barthes modestly announces that Propp "would have been unable to imagine a more convincing application of his discovery."[57] Patricia Erens finds that in *Sunset Boulevard* the blowout of Gillis's tire is "a magical, fortuitous act," that a butler offering a drink is providing a magical agent, and that a kiss is a branding. She exposes the critic's analogical mechanism: "Small shifts in location can be interpreted more broadly if the space is thought of in psychological or metaphorical terms."[58] If we grant such leeway in interpreting Propp's nominalized functions, there are no criteria for impermissible descriptions of story events. Wollen speaks for most Proppian analysts when he reports surprise at "how easily Propp's functions . . . could be applied" to the film at hand.[59] On the contrary, it would be surprising if such an open-ended scheme could not be made to fit.

The failures of Proppian "application" are not simply interpretive oversights. They proceed from inadequate theoretical reflection as well. Analysts ought to have recognized the need for disconfirming conditions, the temptation of analogy and metaphor, and the problems of transcription. More broadly, they ought to have taken Propp's entire theory and method into account. The central error in the revised standard version is, I think, analysts' decision to concentrate solely on Propp's conclusions and to seek wondertale-specific functions in very different sorts of texts. To those who wish to apply his work, Propp offers a clear hint: "The conclusions will differ, many morphological systems will emerge, but the methods can remain the same."[60] This suggests that we could show a structural congruence between the wondertale and a film such as *North by Northwest* in

only two ways. We could assemble a new corpus that includes the film and a set of tales, and through induction infer a common compositional pattern. Alternatively, we could include *North by Northwest* within a larger set of films, infer a structural scheme for that corpus, and test that for congruence with the wondertale by performing a comparable analysis on the wondertale corpus. In either case, the particular functions, auxiliaries, tale roles, and moves that result will not be those which Propp set forth. By assigning wondertale functions to bits of this or that film, analysts have fallen prey to Propp's accusation: "I draw my abstractions from the data, whereas Lévi-Strauss draws abstractions from my abstractions."[61]

I have tried to show that the context, range, and conceptual problems of Propp's work have been inadequately understood within film studies, and that morphological analyses have failed through distortion, omission, unconstrained associations, and theoretical inadequacy. There is at present no sound reason to conclude that films share an underlying structure with folktales, or that film studies' version of Propp's method can reveal the structure underlying a narrative film. Why, we might now ask, did anybody ever think otherwise? Why did film studies create its Propp in the mid-1970s and cling to it for so long?

The usual answer—that literary studies did too, and we customarily copy them—is not good enough in this case. Proppian studies of literary texts are far less common than in our field. A more substantial answer lies in the growing academic status of film studies during the last decade. The post–World War II university milieu encouraged the humanities to develop distinct "methods," on the model of the sciences; in film as in literary studies, such methods often amount to recipes for concocting critical essays on particular films. A streamlined Propp offers a mechanical but apparently rigorous procedure for narrative analysis. Add to this the simplification it promises: narrative analysis reduces to one method, many films reduce to one model, many narratives reduce to one morphology.

All this, however, is still not enough to explain Propp's popularity. I suggest that, given the centrality of interpretation in film and literary criticism, a blatantly taxonomic and meaning-neutral scheme like Propp's could not flourish without serving such ends. The vaguely social grounding of the revised standard version, suggesting a recurrent, perhaps universal pattern of human storytelling, has furnished film studies with its own version of myth criticism. Just as postwar myth-and-archetype analysis provided a way to invest close readings with a broad cultural significance denied to New Criticism, the appropriation of Propp has allowed analysts to argue that films, or television shows, participate in widespread cultural assumptions. From this angle, Propp looks less like our Aristotle than our Northrop Frye.

From another, he can become a proto-Lacan. "It might be possible," reflects Wollen, "to relate a narrative analysis of this kind to such psychoanalytic concepts as phantasy-scenario or family romance." He goes on to suggest that the hero's task involves an "object of desire" connected to "lack"—thereby reinterpreting

Propp's conception of the wondertale's functions.[62] Similarly, Laura Mulvey has sought to interpret Propp's "marriage" function as "the resolution of the Oedipus complex (integration into the symbolic.)"[63] By recasting Propp in this fashion, one can make his schema the vehicle for psychoanalytic allegory.

In a sense, revising Propp and making the result the chief representative of Russian Formalism within film studies has symptomatically postponed consideration of the works of his contemporaries. Tinkering with his static taxonomy has distracted scholars from exploring the far more subtle and flexible narratological concepts offered by such theorists as Shklovsky, Eichenbaum, and Tomashevsky.[64] The revised standard version of Propp encourages the analyst to tailor her or his questions to a mechanical procedure which already has the answers, thanks to a Procrustean grid and a willed indifference to constraints. The Formalist tradition poses questions within a conceptual framework that sets limits of application and encourages a search for counterevidence.[65] At the moment, this research program seems more likely to produce a rich and comprehensive theory of narrative in cinema.

Notes

1. See Eleasar M. Melitinsky, "Structural-Typological Study of the Folktale," *Genre* 4 (1971): 249-79.
2. In 1987, Fredric Jameson judged Aristotle and Propp to be "virtually the only sources of a neutral language of the movement of narrative form." See Jameson, "Reading without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text," in *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*, ed. Nigel Fabb et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 212.
3. Peter Wollen, "Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact," in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 13-15 (orig. 1968), and *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 93-94 (orig. 1969). On Proppian television studies, see, for example, Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1981); Sarah Ruth Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 42-73; and John Fiske, *Television Culture* (Methuen, forthcoming).
4. See Sheila Johnston, "Film Narrative and the Structuralist Controversy: Propp," in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Pam Cook (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 234-38.
5. This is what we might call the "strong" version of the power-of-Propp position. There is a milder version that pursues a "morphological" analysis of a corpus by reducing its narrative patterns to a list of abstract propositions describing the actions performed. (See, for examples, Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975]; Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981], 212-16; David Desser, *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* [Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983], 48-51.) This approach shares with Propp only a procedure of propositional segmentation and characteristically ignores his overall system and particular conclusions. Whatever the merits of the milder version, it does not fall within my purview here.
6. Geoffrey H. Hartmann, "The Struggle for the Text," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed.

Hartmann and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 14. See also John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984), 114-16; and Lennard J. Davis, *Rewriting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), 199. Comparable descriptions in the film studies literature may be found in John Fell, "Vladimir Propp in Hollywood," *Film Quarterly* 30 (Spring 1977): 19-20, and Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 29, 31.

7. A. J. Greimas, *Maupassant: La sémiotique du texte: exercices pratiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 10-11.
8. Dennis Porter, "The Perilous Quest: Baseball as Folk Drama," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1977): 143-57.
9. Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," 49.
10. Propp's preface thanks Zhirmunsky for encouraging him to publish the *Morphology.* See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale,* trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), xxvi. René Wellek suggests that Propp kept his distance from the preeminent Formalists because of the political attacks leveled against the group. See Wellek, "Metapoetics: Two Views," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 4 (1986): 756.
11. Heda Jason, "Precursors of Propp: Formalist Theories of Narrative in Early Russian Ethnopoetics," *Poetics and Theory of Literature* 3 (1977): 477-85.
12. Jason, "Precursors of Propp," 485-91.
13. Ibid., 504-9. See also Aleksander Isaakovich Nikiforov, "On the Morphological Study of Folklore," *Linguistica Biblica* 27-28 (1973): 25-35.
14. Jason, "Precursors of Propp," 507-9.
15. Vladimir Propp, "The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale," in Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore,* ed. Anatoly Liberman, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 70.
16. See, for an explicit and detailed breakdown of his genre scheme, Propp, "Generic Structures in Russian Folktales," *Genre* 4 (1971): 213-48. See also Jason, "Precursors of Propp," 473.
17. Propp, *Morphology,* 106.
18. Propp, "*Historical Roots of the Wondertale:* Premises," in *Theory and History of Folklore,* 102.
19. Propp, "Structural and Historical Study," 70.
20. See, for example, Isador Levin, "Vladimir Propp: An Evaluation on His Seventieth Birthday," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4 (1967): 44; Pieter de Meijer, "Propp in Italy," *Russian Literature* 12 (1982): 1-10.
21. Propp, *Morphology,* 15, 90.
22. Ibid., xxvi.
23. Propp, "*Historical Roots:* Premises," 112-13.
24. *Historical Roots* gives short shrift to the *Morphology*'s functions and all but ignores tale roles and moves. The donor is reduced to Baba Yaga, the villain to a dragon. (See *Les racines historiques du conte merveilleux,* trans. Lise Greul-Apert [Paris: Gallimard, 1983], 63ff, 283ff.) It is these individual motifs that are traced back to their origins. See Mary P. Coote, "Beyond Morphology: Vladimir Propp's *Istoricheske Korni volchebnoi skazki,*" *Russian Literature Journal* 31 (1977): 133-34.
25. They may be found listed in Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore,* 205.
26. Propp, "Transformations of the Wondertale," in *Theory and History of Folklore,* 82.
27. Propp, "The Principles of Classifying Folklore Genres," in *Theory and History of Folklore,* 40.
28. Propp, "On the Historicity of Folklore," in *Theory and History of Folklore,* 57.
29. Propp, "Structural and Historical Study," 68.

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 76.
32. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 77.
33. Propp, *Morphology,* 64-65.
34. Ibid., 25-27, 64.
35. Ibid., 69.
36. For a discussion, see Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal, "The Problem of 'Tale Role' and 'Character' in Propp's Work," in *Patterns in Oral Literature,* ed. Jason and Segal (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 313.
37. This is indeed a "structuralist" insight that deeply influenced Greimas's concept of *actants.* See, for example, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory,* trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 63-83.
38. Propp, *Morphology,* 80-81.
39. Propp, *Morphology,* 93-94. John Fell is exceptional in giving due consideration to Propp's notion of moves ("Propp Goes to Hollywood," 20-22). Kristin Thompson discusses and applies a broad concept of move in *Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 45-46, 64-78. Considered at this level of abstraction, the linking and imbrication of moves reveal very basic compositional patterns that are in no way unique to the wondertale.
40. Ibid., 99-115.
41. Anatoly Liberman's introduction to *Theory and History of Folklore* reviews many problems with Propp's work; see especially xxx-xxxii. In general, Liberman's lively and thorough essay remains the best exposition of Propp's career and ideas that I know.
42. See Claude Bremond and Jean Verrier, "Afanasiev and Propp," *Style* 18 (Spring 1984): 192-94.
43. Propp, *Morphology,* 108.
44. Ibid., 64, 79-80.
45. Ibid., 52, 53.
46. More application-centered ones can, however, be found in Fell, "Propp Goes to Hollywood," 26-27.
47. Propp, *Morphology,* 105.
48. Wollen, "Cinema and Semiology," 14-15; "*North by Northwest:* A Morphological Analysis," *Readings and Writings,* 23.
49. Propp, "The Nature of Folklore," *Theory and History of Folklore,* 6-8; "Folklore and Reality," Ibid., 17-28. Such waivers make it misleading for Sheila Johnston to conclude that Propp's closing quotation from Veselovskij on the permanence of narrative structures raises "the fascinating possibility that primitive, stylised narrative forms might be found to have the same basic armature as modern realist texts" ("Film Narrative," 235).
50. Propp, "Structural and Historical Study," 70.
51. First, Wollen's table employs symbols that Propp did not use: *h,* 3, *P,* and 7. They should be, respectively, η, ζ, *Pr,* and ζ ("*North by Northwest,*" 18-22). Wollen has informed me that these are typographical errors. The table also omits several functions that Wollen identifies in his text. More serious are the disparities between Wollen's table of functions and his two prose glosses. For example, the commentary claims an absentation function (19) and an inversion of the ϵ function (27), neither of which is listed in the table (18). The commentary also calls Van Damm a helper, but Wollen notates the function as Propp's *D,* which involves a donor, not a helper (19-20, 26). That these and other anomalies have not been discussed, or even perhaps noticed,

by later writers who seek to "apply" Propp suggests a reluctance to verify and replicate an analysis. This attitude is far from the stringent scrutiny to which folklorists have subjected the *Morphology.*

52. Wollen, "*North by Northwest,*" 25.
53. Propp, "Structural and Historical Study," 76.
54. Wollen, "*North by Northwest,*" 26.
55. Propp, *Morphology,* 152.
56. Wollen, "*North by Northwest,*" 28-29. Incidentally, the parallel with the folktale's triplication pattern fails because Eve assists Thornhill four times—the first in the corridor while the train is in Grand Central Station.
57. Roland Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel," in *Image Music Text,* ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 139-40.
58. Patricia Erens, " 'Sunset Boulevard': A Morphological Analysis," *Film Reader* 2 (1977): 92-94, 95.
59. Wollen, "*North by Northwest,*" 31.
60. Propp, "Structural and Historical Study," 80.
61. Ibid., 76.
62. Wollen, "*North by Northwest,*" 24, 31-32.
63. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework,* nos. 15/16/17 (1981): 14.
64. For a discussion and extension of these concepts, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 48-62.
65. On this point, see Kristin Thompson, "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods," *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and David Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," in *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches,* ed. R. Barton Palmer (forthcoming).